In recent scholarship, the bilingual mind has gained much attention, the reality being that the majority of the current world population utilizes two or more languages for communication (Cook, 2002). Yet, the complex relationship between language and cognition in a single mind of bilingual speakers has remained largely unexplored; more focused, systematic investigation of thinking and speaking of bilinguals is in need. This masterful volume edited by Aneta Pavlenko, who is one of the leading scholars in bilingualism and thought, contributes to the scholarship by bringing together a broad collection of solid inquiry of bilingualism with a “bilingual lens” (Pavlenko, 2005), which avoids narrow debates about Sapir-Whorf’s linguistic relativity, and by offering well-thought suggestions for the next generation that explores the fields of bilingualism and cross-linguistic cognition. The major question the contributors tackle throughout this volume is: if languages influence the way one thinks, what happens to those who speak more than one language?

This book begins with Pavlenko’s introductory chapter articulating two major goals of the volume: firstly, to demonstrate rigorous research designs that examine the interconnectedness between language and cognition in the bilingual’s mind, rather than following the monolingual norm on which some researchers in the second language acquisition field still draw; and
secondly, to go back to Sapir and Whorf’s focus of investigating everyday life and linguistic thought through the employment of context-sensitive and ecologically valid methodologies for psychological inquiry. As a consequence, Chapters 2 through 7 showcase a range of well-designed studies on the bilingual mind across both verbal and non-verbal behaviors, investigating what bilinguals actually do with languages in the real world and taking into consideration both linguistic and sociocultural variables such as age of language acquisition and length of stay in an L2-speaking country. It is important, however, to consider to what extent this volume has achieved these two goals.

With regard to the first goal, the book fulfills its purpose; each of the six chapters (chapters 2 through 7), unlike an empirical study, synthesizes a range of programmatic work that contributors and their colleagues have conducted on bilingualism and cognition and whose results have been already published in a variety of disciplines, which breaks disciplinary boundaries and adds a unique flair to this edited volume. All of the studies demonstrate the use of rigorous experimental methodologies along with integrating novel methods, fully satisfying Pavlenko’s first goal; for example, Chapter 3 describes studies that combine the data of eye-tracking and speech onset times with linguistic production. In addition to these six chapters, the final chapter by Pavlenko more broadly synthesizes a range of existing and ongoing research designs and findings on speaking and thinking in two languages, whose areas of inquiry are roughly categorized as follows: “(1) non-linguistic cognition, (2) thinking, seeing, and gesturing for speaking; (3) word-to-referent mapping; (4) inner speech; (5) language, thought and autobiographic memory; and (6) negotiation of identities and self-translation” (p. 237).

Each chapter, except for chapters 1 and 8, represents these lines of inquiry; firstly, Athanasopoulos’s paper (ch. 2), classified in the area of non-linguistic cognition, is primarily concerned with perception of color categories and similarity judgments of objects in bilinguals. Secondly, included are Schmiedtová, et al. (ch. 3), Bylund’s (ch. 4), and Gullberg’s (ch. 5) research in the area of thinking, seeing and gesturing for speaking, especially concerning grammatical categories. Schmiedtová, et al. investigate whether L2 speakers of typologically different languages construe goal-oriented motions in accordance with the principles of the L2. Likewise, Bylund examines languages and event conceptualization in bilinguals through the “grammatical aspect approach” (p. 109). On the other
hand, Gullberg explores bilingual (re)conceptualization of motion in rich detail, with a research design examining the interplay of speech and gesture. Finally, Malt and Ameel (ch. 6) and Pavlenko (ch. 7) address word-to-referent mapping, specifically investigating lexical categories. Malt and Ameel explore bilingual speakers’ naming and sorting patterns of mundane household objects such as drinking vessels; Pavlenko primarily studies bilingual lexical choices in the context of elicited narratives with visual stimuli. All of the chapters by these pioneering researchers not only seek to advance our understanding of bilingual speakers’ cognition and languages from a variety of conceptual domains (i.e., object categorization, categorization of colors, event construal, motion talk and gestures, and object naming), but also to provide an in-depth description of methodologies including experimental materials and procedures, which makes this book a much-needed resource for scholars wishing to replicate similar research.

Although the volume does not fully explore all the areas of inquiry mentioned above, which is perhaps a minor weaknesses of this book (yet, it is unrealistic to put together every field in one volume as the editor notes), the final chapter by Pavlenko, instead, offers a concise summary of all the areas of research adding a useful list of references. Importantly, besides the research findings, each chapter concludes with a brief discussion of strengths and weaknesses of the research methodologies presented in each chapter. For example, after reviewing various research methods, Pavlenko (ch. 8) critically points out a limitation among studies investigating whether the age of the learner during L2 acquisition affects the ability to achieve native-like acquisition of the L2; all of the studies to date are engaged with participants who learned their L2 in the context where the L2 is spoken as a native language. Consequently, Pavlenko notes that future research must separate two variables – age of the learner during L2 acquisition and the age of arrival in the L2 context. As another example, Bylund’s chapter acknowledges the need of devising a more reliable measure of the frequency of bilinguals’ language use instead of reliance on their self-reports to capture the sensitive effect of frequency of language use. Such recommendations derived from the synthesis of research will lead to the further advancement of sophisticated research designs.

When it comes to its second goal, precisely, investigating everyday life and linguistic thought and employing context-sensitive methodologies for psychological inquiry, many contributors to this volume put forth a “context-based approach” to the study of bilinguals’ cognition in their ordinary
conversation, moving away from traditional psychological approaches in which the investigation mostly remains “inside” of the mind, where the mind is considered to be a self-contained entity which stores internal representations of everything outside for external referents. To counter such a discontextualized approach, for example, in Chapter 7, Pavlenko introduces studies that elicit narratives with visual stimuli, or film clips, which affords her the ability to examine bilinguals’ spontaneous lexical choices in linguistic and visual contexts. Unlike artificial laboratory tasks, many contributors thus take both experimental and ethnographic approaches and incorporate external reality into empirical investigations.

There are many strengths worth mentioning pertaining to this volume: the quality of the research demonstrated, the breadth of issues addressed, and the well-conceived organization of the chapters. Furthermore, in this reviewer’s opinion, this volume is filled with intriguing and promising future perspectives and opportunities to address the research gaps in bilingual minds from “a scholarly dialog that goes beyond a single study at a time” (p. 4). An interesting example is found in Malt and Ameel’s chapter, where they raise a question of whether there is some possible L2 influence on L1, namely, learning a new pattern of naming everyday objects in the L2 may change the older pattern of naming in the L1. Much effort has so far been devoted to investigating the influence of L1 on L2, but the opposite direction is still an under-researched area (see, Pavlenko and Malt, in press). Likewise, Gullberg’s chapter suggests that L2 influence on L1 might occur even at modest levels of L2 proficiency. The potential effect of L2 on L1 addressed in multiple chapters forges an interesting link among individual studies in this volume. Such exciting insights regarding future research fields are indeed informative for the reader.

If there is a weakness in this volume, it might be in the possibility of readers’ getting lost in the detailed explanations about a wide range of experimental methodologies and quantitative analysis; those specific methodological explanations and correlational analyses seem challenging to the untrained audience with little background knowledge and experience in the field. Nevertheless, readers can still benefit from the general descriptions of methodologies and overall findings in the conclusion of each chapter. Furthermore, due to a number of images – charts and figures (e.g., photographs of the wide range of drinking containers and pictures of goal-oriented motions for verbalization) found in most chapters, one can easily imagine the experimental settings. To add, Pavlenko succinctly introduces
the history of research on bilingualism and thought of the 20th century in the opening chapter along with the overview of the field including studies in this volume in the concluding chapter, both of which will surely become a great introduction to the field for any reader. Nevertheless, if Pavlenko had explicated the six categories of inquiry in her introductory chapter a little more, readers could have more easily begun reading each chapter by connecting it with each domain of inquiry. All in all, this book will be highly valued by all the readers including graduate students and scholars interested in taking on a journey in a mysterious world of the bilingual’s mind exploring how the speaking of more than one language may affect one’s thinking and perception of the world.

References

